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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000898

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: REACTIONS TO BLOGGER GUILTY VERDICT

REF: BAKU 888

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) SUMMARY: The EU, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, in addition to the Norwegian and German governments, have issued statements of concern regarding the November 11 guilty verdict and sentencing of youth activists Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade. EU Special Envoy Peter Semneby raised it verbally with President Aliyev, who alluded to the possibility of a presidential pardon. Deputy Foreign Minister Vagif Sadiqov called the German and Norwegian DCMs into the MFA to protest their statements. Charge the raised the issue with DFM Sadiqov, who was interested in a suggestion that the two men might pursue graduate study overseas after their release. END SUMMARY.

Verdict Condemned Publicly By International Community

12. (C) The international community has reacted swiftly to the guilty verdict and sentencing of youth activists and bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade. In addition to a statement from the Swedish EU presidency, the German government issued its own separate statement of concern. The Norwegian government, the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom and the OSCE Office in Baku, the Council of Europe Secretary General (CoE SG) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) rapporteurs on Azerbaijan have also issued public statements. The CoE SG statement was particularly strong, and the CoE representative in Baku said it was written in Strasbourg, not by her office in Baku. Presidential Advisor Ali Hasanov and ruling party MP Mubariz Gurbanli have both responded publicly to these statements, calling them unwanted interference in Azerbaijan's internal affairs.

EU Special Envoy Confronts the President

13. (C) According to the British DCM, on November 16 EU Special Envoy Peter Semneby confronted President Aliyev by asking how the President could have allowed this difficult situation with the youth activists to have gone so far. Aliyev responded that he has amnestied other people before and he could amnesty these two men. Semneby then offered that it would be even better if they were found innocent upon appeal.

MFA Interested in Foreign Scholarship Idea

¶4. (C) On November 16, the Charge approached First Deputy Foreign Minister Vagif Sadiqov after having heard that he had summoned the Norwegian and German DCMs to protest their embassies, public statements critical of the sentencing. Not only did Sadiqov not mention the U.S. statement, he was at pains to provide reassurance to the U.S. over this issue. The Charge outlined USG concerns over the sentencing and asked whether the government would find it helpful if the Embassy was able to identify scholarships for these two men to pursue graduate study abroad after their release. Sadiqov welcomed the constructive suggestion and said that he would brief it to the minister. He added that he hoped this whole "terrible incident" would be over soon and that these men would be allowed to remain in Azerbaijan or pursue opportunities abroad once released. He attributed the entire issue to a series of misunderstandings. He cited the government's own scholarship program for foreign universities as evidence that Azerbaijan is concerned about the development of its youth.

Presidential Apparat Jokes About the Case

¶5. (C) Charge raised the issue with the President's Personal Assistant Ali Asadov on November 16. Asadov then turned to his assistant and asked how long their prison sentences were. "Two and two and a half years. That's not so bad. I don't know who handles this issue in the Presidential Apparat, but I do know it's not Ali Asadov!," he exclaimed.

Comment

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¶6. (C) Embassy will continue to raise the case with GOAJ officials and the international community in an attempt to seek due process for these youth activists. European Embassy contacts look likely to do the same. The OSCE Office in Baku will use the upcoming visit of Azeri officials from Warsaw to Baku to ask to visit Milli and Hajizade in prison.
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